

VZCZCXRO3832
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0917 2261338
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141338Z AUG 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5539
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3539
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4070
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000917

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
PARIS FOR J MILLER
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FO SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DATON
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/12/019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: CAN SLEIMAN MUSCLE DECENTRALIZATION?

REF: BEIRUT 00878

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, moving forward on his August 1 Army Day calls for constitutional reforms and full implementation of Taif, convened in early August a small meeting of municipal leaders to discuss decentralization. Although the president appears serious in his efforts to push such reforms, some municipal leaders, including Sidon mayor Abed Bizri, question whether the president has the political muscle to adopt measures, such as administrative decentralization, that would directly threaten the interests of Lebanon's "political elite." End summary.

NOT JUST TALK ...

2. (C) President Michel Sleiman has repeatedly called for government reform, including in his August 1 Army Day speech (reftel), and has said that the incoming parliament and yet-to-be-formed cabinet should implement the many outstanding political, administrative, and judicial reforms. Sleiman has met with various groups to discuss reform implementation, including with a small cross-section of municipal leaders from the country's larger municipalities to address decentralization in early August.

... BUT ENOUGH MUSCLE?

3. (C) Mayor of Sidon Abed Bizri, one of eight mayors present at the early August meeting, assessed that although Sleiman was "enthusiastic" about decentralization, he lacked adequate political authority to move the issue forward. Lebanon has no true social contract, Bizri told Poloff August 12. Instead of looking to the state for services and protection, citizens sought favors from local "zaims" (feudal leaders). Bizri confirmed that as mayor, he granted ten to sixty such favors each day. Decentralization would threaten larger sectarian leaders but would also cut sharply into the support of parliamentarians, present in their districts only during

election season.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) Although decentralization has become a popular conversation topic in recent months, with President Sleiman and caretaker Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud publicly backing the reform, an actionable path forward is still unclear. Administrative legal issues -- including empowering municipalities to make decisions without pre-approval by the central government but also allowing them to tax citizens for services provided -- need to be addressed. The biggest question, however, remains whether Lebanon's political elite, who have the most to lose in any redistribution of authority, will throw their weight behind this reform. End comment.

SISON